DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 153 293 CS 502 079

AUTHOR Rybacki, Donald Jay; Rybacki, Karyn Charles
TITLE Relational Conflict between Members of Teacher's Unions and Community Members as a Result of Collective Action: Isolation and Resolution.
PUB DATE Apr 78
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Central States Speech Association (Chicago, Illinois, April 13-15, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication Problems; *Community Attitudes; Conflict; *Conflict Resolution; *School Community Relationship; Teacher Administrator Relationship; Teacher Associations; *Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Strikes

ABSTRACT

An identity identification model may be used to isolate and understand the conflicts in communication that teacher's unions experience with the surrounding community when they strike. A union's identity is those attitudes held in common by the members; its identification is the attitudes toward it held by those in the surrounding community. During a strike, the previous patterns of identity identification are disrupted; community members who saw the teachers as neighbors jointly engaged in educating their children may now see them as unreasonable and greedy. After a strike, teachers may view themselves as no longer in servitude, while community members may view them with less respect for being "unprofessional." These identity identification discrepancies can be resolved if teachers' unions enact the following three suggestions: increase visibility in the community on an on-going basis so that the union is not heard of only during strikes; make more contacts with leaders of other community groups, turning their potential resistance into advocacy; and convey a clear, consistent, and factual message to the community. (CC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED153293

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

RELATIONAL CONFLICT BETWEEN MEMBERS OF TEACHER'S UNIONS AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS AS A RESULT OF COLLECTIVE ACTION: Isolation and Resolution

Donald Jay Rybacki, Northern Michigan University
Karyn Charles Rybacki, Northern Michigan University

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Donald Jay Rybacki
Karyn Charles Rybacki
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

ABSTRACT

Members of teacher's unions perceive themselves to be in a conflicted relationship with members of the community both during and after a strike. Using the Burkean concept of identity-identification, this paper isolates the genesis of the conflict. Strategies to resolve conflict, based on change-agent theory from management, are offered which allow the union to reverse resentment into advocacy of its cause by non-union community members.

Interpersonal Conflict and Conflict Resolution
Central States Speech Association Convention
1978

CS502079

INTRODUCTION

"These are teachers. They walk picket lines. Among them are veterans of World War II and Korea, gray haired women, and mini-skirted beginners. . . . Teachers have not changed; their attitude has. . . . Having an annual tea party is no longer sufficient."[1] In the decade of the seventies, the replacement for the tea party is the strike. While 1960-61 saw only 3 strikes, causing the loss of 5,080 person days, 1974-75 saw 121 strikes, resulting in the loss of over 700,000 person days.[2] Such collective actions, whether undertaken by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) or the National Education Association (NEA), bring the members of the organization into conflict with sectors of the community or the community as a whole.

ELEMENTS OF THE CONFLICT

Contributory Elements

All public sector unions are subject to factors influencing their interface with their external environment, the community, unlike those confronting private sector unions. Foremost of these is the relative inelasticity of demand for the services provided by public sector organizations. Teaching is a relatively demand-inelastic field.[3] With the exception of forces of population/birth rate change, and migration into and out of the district, the law requiring formal education for children until a certain age creates an inelastic demand for teachers' services. The consumer

has no choice regarding whether or not he/she will pay for these services.

Linked to this lack of choice for the consumer is the trade-off between an increase in taxes or a reduction in services. The decision to spend more on education will lead either to a bigger tax bite on those who reside in the district or a reduction of other services for the general welfare of the community.[4] Whenever there is competition for slices of an economic "pie" of finite dimension, conflict among interest groups will always be greater in intensity.[5]

Finally, the mere existance of unions means there will inevitably be collective action. Weintraub and Thornton suggest:

> the approach we take views teacher strikes essentially as an investment in the present and future bargaining power of the teachers' union. In order to maintain its credibility, the union must, from time to time, carry its strike threat to fruition.[6]

Strikes have the effect of producing greater cohesion within/solidarity with the union by placing it in confrontation with outgroups[7] such as the board of education or even the entire community.

Thus, teachers' unions are placed in an environment which has a high likelihood of inducing conflict between their membership and individuals composing that environment. The promise of conflict inherent in the environment materializes when a strike looms eminent or occurs.

A Model to Isolate Conflict in Communication

The communication patterns symptomatic of conflict may be

better understood in terms of the concept of identity-identification. Burke explains a thing's identity as "its uniqueness an an entity in itself and by itself, a demarcated unit having its own particular structure."[8] Thus, the union membership creates for themselves an identity, those attitudes, beliefs and assumptions which the members hold in common and use to identify themselves in the intra-group context. Then, their identification is created by their external environment, those attitudes, beliefs and assumptions which the external environment assigns to the union and its members to distinguish them from other elements of the environment in the inter-group context.

If the identity and identification of an organization are isomorphic, the potential for conflict between the organization's members and members of the external environment over the raison d'etre of the organization is minimal.[9] When the two are not isomorphic, the potential for such conflict may be realized.[10]

Identity-Identification Patterns in a Strike

A strike disrupts previous patterns of identity-identification which stress homophilous elements of the relationship. Prior to a strike, teachers and members of the community may view themselves as neighbors, jointly engaged in and concerned with the education of "our" children. When a strike occurs, union members obviously differentiate their collective identity from that of their external environment.

The union member frequently identifies him/herself as the oppressed worker. His/her demands are made in response to some

perceived inequity which "exists for a Person when he perceives that the ratio of his outcomes to inputs and the ratio of an Other's outcomes to inputs are unequal."[11] The persona of the "Other" may be assigned specifically or generally within the community. The Other in a strike is assigned the identification of oppressor, or one who has no concern for the oppression of the worker.

When a strike occurs in the public sector, community members are confronted by it directly. They see their children's school close. The identity these individuals may assume is that of the hard working tax-payer, doing his/her fair share, or even all that can be done, for the worker. The identification assigned the union member may be that of an unreasonable, selfish, and greedy worker.

As the union interfaces with its external environment there will be conflict resulting from the disparity in identity-identification. The dissonance caused by accepting the "other side's" offer/demands, and the identification of "self" which accompanies them, makes the strike difficult to settle immediately. Protracting the strike creates the danger of the following occurring. In the inter-group and inter-personal context, patterns of identity-identification become deeply and bitterly entrenched and prospects of conflict resolution and a return to conditions existing before the strike are drastically reduced. In the intra-group and intra-personal context, patterns of identity produce dissonance when they are compared to patterns of identity held prior to the strike to which individuals wish to return after the strike.

Protracted strikes in the public sector have a different effect on the parties involved than in the private sector, where the only

"winner" in a long strike is management. In the public sector, a long strike works to the short-term advantage of the union, because elected decision-makers, fearing reaction in the next election if the strike is not brought to a speedy conclusion, may capitulate.[12] AFT President Albert Shanker reports strikes have become "longer and tougher."[13] From 1958 to 1968, the number of public sector strikes increased from 15 to 254, and their length grew from 4.37 to 12.38 days.[14]

The short-term advantage gained by protracting strikes has deleterious long-term relational consequences for the union in its interface with its external environment. Since "it is not meaningful to talk about a beginning or an end to communication, because, like all other processes, communication flows like a stream through time,"[15] the state of conflict existing during a strike may become generalized to the post-strike period.

Identity-Identification Patterns after a Strike

NEA and AFT Perspective: Teachers' attitudes concerning their relationship to the rest of the community is expressed as a shift away from servitude. As Ryor explains:

> it seems that so long as we teachers were quiet and acquiescent, worked for poverty wages and never made demands, we were labelled "professional." But when teachers demanded the right to negotiate rather than serve . . . declared that public service did not mean public servitude, we were labelled "unprofessional."[16]

As a result of their willingness to take action in concert, teachers

recognize a shift in their identity-identification. One Littleton, Colorado teacher welcomed such a change in remarking "the attitude of people toward . . . strikes and teachers in general must change. . . . We're no longer going to be sacrifical lambs."[17]

The desire to be a lion rather than a lamb was, perhaps, in the mind of a Chicago teacher who told a parent's group:

> Plumbers do not give lectures on surgical techniques. Television repairmen do not presume to expostulate on the law. However, every knucklehead in town will be glad to tell you what is wrong with schools and what the schools need.[18]

While it is not clear whether such militancy is the cause or effect, 82% of the subjects in a study of AFT teachers expressed the feeling they were subjected to unfair criticism by the community.[19]

In summary, the perspective of the NEA and AFT is one in which: 1) a shift in identification was sought, 2) the shift has taken place, and 3) the consequences of the shift are perceived as threatening. It is not conjectural to argue the NEA and AFT perceive themselves to be in a state of conflict with their external environment.

External Environment Perspective: Public conceptualizations of teacher professionalism are at variance with those held by teachers themselves. The public attitude is expressed by the view "certain professional people . . . are expected to put service to others before personal profit. In this respect, the image of the educator has common traits with that of the healer of the sick."[20] However, successfully discharging this public trust doesn't bring

with it community respect. A report on the prestige of professions, contemporaneous to the description of the teacher's function, ranked teaching twenty-ninth.[21]

As teachers have acted in concert, their external environment has become increasingly hostile. "Teachers' 'professional days,' mass 'sick leaves,' and strikes engendered a good deal of bitterness in many communities."[22] In New York, "black parents in particular were outraged at the union's demand for a contract provision granting teachers the right to exclude from classes pupils labeled disruptive."[23] McLennan and Moskow report a tendency for community based groups to become increasingly distressed:

> with the union's contribution to solving the educational problems of the community. Many groups claimed to have worked with, and supported the union in its fight to become bargaining agent. Now that the union had achieved its present status . . . it was no longer interested in community problems.[24]

Thus, the perception of the union's external environment has become hostile, ranging from dissatisfaction to outrage.

The discrepancy between the NEA and AFT's view of their level of professionalism, identity, and the identification assigned these two groups is predictive of conflict. This represents a shift from the cohesion with the external environment experienced during their inception.[25] The shift, and the conflict, is explainable in terms of patterns of identity-identification implicitly and explicitly communicated during a strike, which alter relational patterns after it.

RESOLUTION OF THE CONFLICT

The number one item of negotiation in 1976 was salary increases.[26] Even in cases where money was not the key issue, the external environment was unconvinced.

> Teachers strike to make life a little more tolerable by gaining one or more of the following: money; more free time; less administrative or board interference; more insurance, health care and pension benefits (money); shorter working hours; job security; the freedom to be (or refuse to be) creative, troublesome, ultra-conservative, radical, moderate, chic, sloppy, unconcerned, indifferent, excellent or mediocre; a temporary escape from boredom; and, when a bureaucracy becomes overwhelming, just a chance to kick the whole goddam system in the you-know-what.[27]

Even when the external environment views a strike as motivated by non-monetary causes, the causes they perceive are not those to which they can lend immediate and overwhelming approval. The only points at which the union surfaces visibly enough to be distinguished as a unique group are precisely the points at which they are most likely to have an undesirable identification assigned.

Benne notes "narrow time-perspective within the decision-making process - a lack of perception of long-range consequences of action relevant to an immediate decision - tends toward a pattern of living from crisis to crisis in the life of the system."[28] Substitute "teacher union" for "system" and the current communication problem faced by these groups is graphically portrayed.

The most obvious approach to ameliorating conflict lies in alterring the time frame in which the union presents itself to its external environment. Lippitt suggests change agents, and unionized teachers operate in such a capacity, be wary of resistance. Excessive pressure, such as that which the union's external environment may feel when a strike suddenly occurs, has the effect of maximizing resistance to change.[29] Therefore, the first step must be to increase union visibility on an on-going basis within the community in which it must function as an agent of change.

Second, the union must identify other groups within the environment and their leadership. In industrial settings, when members of groups, or those possessing the greatest influence in those groups, are included in planning the change effort, potential resistance is turned into advocacy.[30] Taking the industrial case as an analog, it may be possible for this process to be operationalized by the union since the ability of community based groups to affect the outcome of negotiation has already been documented.[31]

Third, in conjunction with the two preceding steps, the union must carry a clear, consistent and factual message to the community. Hampton, Summer and Webber argue the burden of proof rests with the agent for change in organizational/governmental settings.[32] If information concerning the proposed change is inadequate, uncertainty within the external environment may crystalize as a source of conflict and an obstacle to change.[33] The function of this suggestion is to force the union to clarify its purpose within the system and its relationship with its external environment over an extended, rather than a constricted, temporal dimension.

Together, these three suggestions change the interpersonal data base on which the external environment would rely in assigning identification to the union. Rather than restricting the external environment's exposure to the union to those times when it is hardest pressed to conceptualize it in a positive manner, these suggestions would allow the union to create the image of ongoing change agent in the community.

If the more positive identification of the union were to occur during the pre-strike/non-strike period, three relational manifestations during and after a strike are predicted, based on previously cited literature. One, during a strike, conflict would focus on the union-board of education relationship to a greater, if not exclusive, extent. Two, non-board members of the union's external environment would be more likely to feel a common identity with the union, and might also accept the union's identification of the other party to the strike. This would effectively bring pressure to bear on behalf of the union. Three, any generalization of identity-identification to the post-strike period would enhance solidarity between the union and non-board elements of their external environment.

Groups are man's creation, and analogs between group and individual experience exist. Both possess identity/direct perspective, and identification/meta-perspective, on relational issues, experience conflict over mismatched patterns of issue perception, and engage in communication to cope with conflicted relationships. Ultimately, concepts isolated regarding the relationship discussed in this paper are applicable across the spectrum of human relationships.

FOOTNOTES

[1]R.S. Kowalczyk, Sorry . . . No Government Today: Unions Vs. City Hall (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), pp. 108-109.

[2]D. Ross, "Collective Bargaining: A Public Educational Reality," Journal of Current Social Issues, 13 (1976), pp. 33-39.

[3]For a complete discussion of the differences between public and private sector unions, see: H.H. Wellington and R.K. Winter, The Unions and the Cities (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1971).

[4]Wellington and Winter, pp. 30-31.

[5]S. Kerr and E.B. Kerr, "Why Your Employees Resist Perfectly 'Rational' Changes," Hospital Finance Management, 26 (1972), pp. 4-6.

[6]A.R. Weintraub and R.J. Thornton, "Why Teachers Strike: The Economic and Legal Determinants," Journal of Collective Negotiation, 5 (1976), p. 195.

[7]For a discussion of confrontation, see: L. Cosser, The Functions of Social Conflict (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1956).

[8]K. Burke, A Rhetoric of Motives (Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1969), p. 21.

[9]For a discussion of conflict between an organization and its external environment, see: J.W. Burton, Conflict and Communication (New York: MacMillian, 1969), 13-39; J.W. Koehler, K.W. Anatol, and R.L. Applbaum, Organizational Communication: Behavioral Perspectives (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1976), p. 3; Gordon L. Lippitt, Vizualizing Change (Fairfax, Virginia: Learning Resources, 1973), 215-268; and G.T. Vardman

and C.C. Halterman, Managerial Control Through Communication (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1968).

[10]The potential for conflict is also discussed by Burton, Koehler et al., Lippitt, Vardman and Halterman, and Wellington and Winter.

[11]J.S. Adams, "Injustice and Social Exchange," Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, Vol. 2 (New York: Academic Press, 1965), p. 280.

[12]Wellington and Winter, 167-201.

[13]A. Shanker, "A Report from the President," American Teacher, 61 (1976), p. 3.

[14]Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations, Labor-Management Policies for State and Local Government (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1969).

[15]E.M. Rogers and R.A. Rogers, Communication in Organizations (New York: Free Press, 1976), p. 17.

[16]J.E. Ryor, "Teachers Changing Image: Goodbye Mr. Peepers, Hello Lucas Tanner," Pennsylvania School Journal, 24 (1976), p.109.

[17]T. James, "Legislative Preview: Money and Bargaining," Compact, the Magazine on Education and Politics in the States, 9 (1975), pp. 7-21.

[18]Changing Education, 13 (1975), p.4.

[19]Changing Education, p. 4.

[20]A.S. Wittlin, "The Teacher," The Professions in America (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1965), p. 91.

[21]Ross, pp. 33-39.

[22]E.F. Beal, E.D. Wickersham, and P. Kienast, The practice of Collective Bargaining (Homewood, Illinois: Irwin, 1972), p. 133.

[23]C.W. Cheng, "Community Representation in Teacher Collective Bargaining: Problems and Prospects," Harvard Educational Review, 46 (1976), p. 159.

[24]K.H. McLennan and M.H. Moskow, "Public Education," Emerging Sectors of Collective Bargaining (Morristown, New Jersey: General Learning Corporation, 1970), p. 240.

[25]McLennan and Moskow, pp. 238-52.

[26]The entire issue of the American Teacher, 61 (September, 1976), is devoted to coverage of the gains made by AFT unions in collective bargaining.

[27]R.J. Braun, Teachers and Power (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), pp. 102-3.

[28]K.D. Benne, "Deliberate Changing as the Facilitation of Growth," The Planning of Change (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1961), p. 233.

[29]Lippitt, 215-268.

[30]K.C. Scheflen, E.E. Lawler, and J.R. Hackman, "Long Term Impact of Employee Participation in the Development of Pay Incentive Plans: A Field Experiment Revisited," Journal of Applied Psychology, 55 (1971), pp. 182-86.

[31]McLennan and Moskow, 240-44.

[32]D.R. Hampton, C.E. Summer, and R.A. Webber, Organizational Behavior and the Practice of Management (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman, 1973).

[33]Kerr and Kerr, pp. 4-6.